

DISTINGUISHED ALUMNUS AWARD

Al Mateczun, MD, Class of 1978



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BY WENDY GROSSMAN KANTOR

The School of Medicine's class of 1978 did something no other class ever did – it created the legendary “box.”

Students packed the lecture hall the first day of every block to see what the box would do. On the first day of urology, for example, salty yellow liquid shot out. The box also fired pingpong balls at a student who regularly asked too many questions, and flashed signs at professors whose lectures ran overtime.

On Veteran's Day, a flag rose out of the box and a fan blew, waving the flag, while a Jimi Hendrix-style national anthem played on the saxophone.

“It became famous,” says this year's Distinguished Alumnus awardee, Al Mateczun, 75, whose electrical engineering skills provided the magic that made the box operate.

Born and raised in Albuquerque, Mateczun earned an engineering degree at the Air Force Academy, then served as a pilot in Vietnam. He and his younger brother John (a 2015 Distinguished Alumnus) both fought in the 1968 Tet Offensive.

When they came home, they were admitted into the same medical school class at UNM. They studied for their national boards together, and together joined the Navy in their last year. Both did their residencies at the Naval Regional Medical Center in Oakland, Calif. (John became a psychiatrist, and Al an ophthalmologist.)

Al Mateczun worked in ophthalmology for eight years before moving into aviation medical research. “Since I'd been a pilot, a guy I worked for offered me a job,” he says. “It's pretty schizophrenic, moving from engineering to biology and medicine. If you integrate it, you can use both approaches and maybe get a more comprehensive solution.”

Now, he heads the Biological Defense Research Directorate under the Naval Medical Research Center.

After 9/11, his lab worked with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Army testing during the anthrax scare. “That was a big deal, a big service to the country,” he says.

He even co-invented a new anthrax vaccine. “We ultimately never got the patent,” he says. “It worked on mice fine.”

Three years ago, during the Ebola epidemic in Liberia, Mateczun sent two portable labs to test people for Ebola virus.

“That was quite innovative,” he says. “It helped break the epidemic, too. We could tell by the next morning whether somebody had Ebola. And if they didn't, we could get them out of the compound.”

The work he's most proud of is his study of bacteriophages to cure antibiotic-resistant infections in troops returning home from Iraq. “That's one of the best things I've ever done,” he says.

His lab made national news, from Buzzfeed to the Washington Post, after phages – viruses that can infect and kill bacterial cells – from his lab helped save a civilian's life. Tom Patterson, a 68-year-old psychiatry professor at the University of California, San Diego, had picked up an antibiotic-resistant super bug while traveling in Egypt. He was in a coma for six weeks.

“They sent us the infection,” Mateczun says. “We found the right phages to kill it.” The phages were shipped to California, where they were injected directly into Patterson's blood stream. “He came out of the coma two days later, and is now back to work, totally cured,” he says.

Mateczun met his wife 20 years ago while running the Navy's infectious disease lab in Cairo.

“This is a typical sailor story,” he says. She and her brother were running Chinese restaurants, and someone from the U.S. Embassy introduced them. “American sailor meets Chinese ex-pat in Cairo,” he says.

When he's not working, he spends time in his vegetable garden at his home in Frederick, Md., cultivating heirloom tomatoes, zucchini and melons. Recently, he's been studying the history of Ireland.

Mateczun doesn't have any plans to retire.

“I'll just keep doing the job until I die,” he says. “It's working. We're making progress.” ❁